


TONER



EXCERPTED FROM ISSUE 2: **the Prodigal Son's Return**

there are no grooming businesses or dog shows or movies with astute dogs that play basketball. There you can kill your pup if she barks too loud, and your wife if you catch her in bed with someone. There, no water exists to flush away the urine smell in bus stations, churches, or schools. There you can order a hot dog/white rice/mayonnaise platter and your companions won't flinch. Harpo might be greeted with smiles and strokes, but she would really be just another digestive system hogging the troughs.

"The dog shit is different here."

My buddy Ty from California was commenting on the aging piles that hurdle the Quito sidewalks on your way to work.

"It looks anguished. No healthy American coil. Maybe it's the altitude."

We chalked up another reason to feel superior.

#855: American dog shit is happier.

We had already listed America's obvious advantages—food, health care, clothing, housing, education, fitness, contraception, human rights, law and order, transportation, clean-air technology, and absolute reign over the entire universe—so we were excited to get witty with dog shit. We relied on our sardonic smarts for escapism because we were too scared



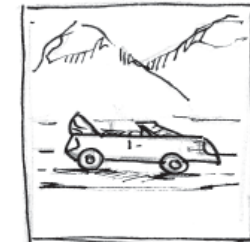
FOOD



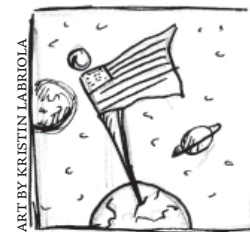
HOUSING



CONTRACEPTION



TRANSPORTATION



REIGN OVER UNIVERSE

ART BY KRISTIN LABRIOLA

only because of my poor grammar. I also never spoke to any official water people to hear the counterpoint tale.

That night Ty and I slept in bunk beds in his private room. He had the top bunk and his own mosquito net from California. I was on the bottom and completely vulnerable to the elements. The place reeked of rotting wood and bug spray, and periodically something nipped me under my clothes.

“Ah! Fucking fuckhead mother-fucking bugs!”

“Makes you miss Quito, doesn’t it?”

“Hell no.”

I could hear Ty fondling the crucifix around his neck. He was a fairly devout Episcopalian which must be one of the lenient denominations. Not that I know religion. We had had several simplified theological discussions that frustrated the hell out of him. It turned his mind inside out to fathom my agnosticism.

“How can you live everyday without believing in an afterlife?”

“Umm...I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

“So you didn’t adopt any religious ideals at all from your upbringing?”

“Eh, we got presents at Chanukah. Besides, Jews don’t have an afterlife.”

“WHAT?!”

He gave up on his half-hearted mission to convert me but found me open-minded enough to hear about his God, his Universal Truths, and other peoples Gods and Truths.

“I hate the Catholicism here,” he was beginning a tangent from the bunk, “I guess it gives the kids discipline, but it’s so fucking loveless. They recite the same prayers everyday, sit in a ridiculously adorned church without shoes on their goddamn feet, praying to God that when they’re kicked out of the orphanage at 14 that they won’t starve or get killed or prostituted.

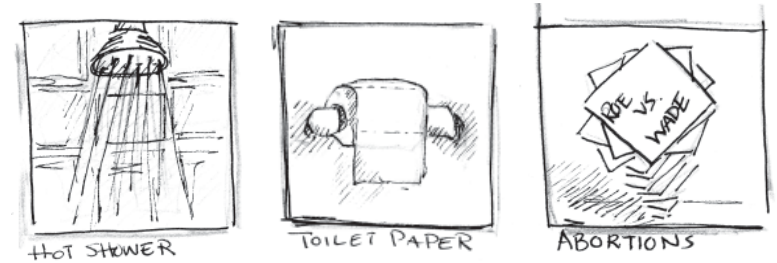
“Meanwhile, this is a space to feel genuine love. But the nuns won’t even let me hug the kids! Why? Because they’ll get ‘too accustomed to it’ and won’t be able to handle leaving. I think that’s bullshit.

“Not to mention I can’t tell a goddamn soul here that I’m gay. The Italian guy, the dog-killer, is starting to suspect something. I mean am I that obvious? What is it? Is it my bleach blond hair? My rhinestone belt? My over-annunciated S’s?”

Despite all our differences, I loved that kid’s irony. And I couldn’t wait to hear it everywhere again.

“I’m leaving in two days,” I said suddenly.

“No! You shouldn’t go back to Quito! Just stay here!”



“What are houses made of in Ecuador?” my mother asked.

“Concrete.”

I felt like an expert all of a sudden.

I took a six hour bus ride to visit Ty at the orphanage. I figured I could squeeze an article for the newspaper out somewhere. Ecuador’s water appropriation was a hot topic at the time and I assumed—correctly—that orphanages were getting a paltry end of the deal.

I was also itching to see Ty again. I didn’t seem to be interacting with anybody sans detached amusement. My latest friends included a Colombian architect with a crack addiction, a lackluster Mormon missionary from Salt Lake, and a cherub-like arsonist from Argentina. These were the interactions I wrote home about, but in my most private of spheres they didn’t exceed good material. Ty was the only one who could make fun of his own damn self.

I arrived at León while it was still dark. It was much warmer in these coastal towns. The air was lighter and cleaner, the vegetation denser. The cabbie dropped me off at a church gate and charged me two American dollars. He was actually ripping me off, but I was in no mood defend principles for pennies. He told me the neighborhood was dangerous, that he’d do anything to help out “una gringita muy sexy,” so he’d wait behind me while I rang the bell. He parked very close. This made me feel far more antsy than any potential crimes lurking in the trees. He left only when I mimed excitement at someone approaching. “Someone comes now, thank you.”

But in reality nobody approached the gate except four pissed off Guinness colored German shepherds. Their wails stung the night’s silence and one by one the orphanage lights turned on. I tried frantically to shush the dogs but they only barked louder. One of them clawed at the gate, which only then did I realize was hanging by a flimsy wooden hinge.